

TESTIMONY OF

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On behalf of

**THE AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION**

Before the

**HOUSE GOVERNMENT REFORM SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERALISM AND THE  
CENSUS**

On

**“Life In The Big City: What Is Census Data Telling Us About Urban America? Are  
Policymakers Really Listening?”**

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Good morning Chairman Turner, Ranking Member Clay, and members of the subcommittee, I am Paul Farmer, Executive Director of the American Planning Association (APA). Thank you for holding this important hearing on the changing face of urban America and the critical role of federal data in helping planners and policymakers make sound decisions that lead to better futures for the nation's cities.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for your strong leadership in Congress on behalf of urban communities. APA has been honored to assist your efforts through Speaker Hastert's Saving America's Cities Task Force. We applaud your work in bringing attention, energy, and resources to the issues facing planning and cities.

I appear today both as CEO of the nation's oldest and largest association dedicated to the promotion of good planning that creates communities of lasting value and as a professional planner having served cities as varied, interesting, and challenging as Pittsburgh, Minneapolis, and Eugene, Oregon. I first learned of city planning as a high school student in Shreveport, Louisiana, where I was fascinated by changes in my city. First, I asked why, and then I learned that a profession existed that was dedicated to improving choices for our communities and bettering peoples' lives.

APA appreciates the opportunity to discuss census data and its relationship to planning and policymaking. The American Planning Association represents 37,000 professional planners, planning commissioners, and engaged citizens interested in shaping the vision for the future of their communities. APA's members are involved, in the private sector and at all levels of government, in formulating and implementing plans that engage citizens in a thoughtful and careful process designed to create a blueprint for the future. These plans reflect local values, promote wise stewardship of resources, increase choices for how we work, live and play, and enhance local quality of life.

Fundamental to a good planning process is a thorough understanding of the condition of the community and the social, demographic, and economic forces shaping cities and city regions. We cannot craft a vision for the future without an accurate assessment of where we are and the

trends likely to affect us moving forward. Data are critical as we make this assessment that forms the foundation of the planning process. Timely, accurate, and targeted data are absolutely essential to good planning, and good planning is likewise essential to good decisions about development, social services, and public investment.

Public participation is vital to any effective planning process, and good data sources are increasingly driving innovations in public involvement. Rapid advances in planning technologies coinciding with better community data are leading to new tools that improve the public's role in planning. Good data are the hidden backbone of sophisticated Geographic Information System and scenario planning software that allows citizens to literally see the potential impacts of public policy decisions involving land use, development regulations, redevelopment options, zoning, and infrastructure investments. These technologies have proven effective at engaging people in decisions about the future of their neighborhood and community. However, it is important to realize that the technology and the process are only as good as the underlying data.

Census data have traditionally been, and today still remain, the single most important data resource for planning. Census and other federal data are critical to the development of plans. The importance of these data for local governments, however, goes well beyond application in the planning process. Census data are used extensively by planners and other local officials in applying for grants and aid, and in many instances federal and state programs require the use of census data in program administration or resource allocation.

As you are well aware, the vital Community Development Block Grant program relies heavily on census data in its formula for funding allocation. Metropolitan Planning Organizations, which by federal statute are responsible for transportation investment plans, are designated based on census data. A growing number of state programs disburse funding based on census information. For many programs and policy decisions, Census Bureau data are the only practical, affordable and readily available datasets that have universally established validity.

While the unparalleled importance of census data in local planning and policymaking is clear, important challenges remain. To its credit, the Census Bureau has recognized the changing data needs of cities and the new applications of census data for planning, public involvement, and decision-making.

Two of the most important problems with any dataset used for planning are accuracy and scale. Good planning demands data that are as up-to-date as possible and appropriate to the geographic scale of decision-making under debate. The pace of demographic and economic change in our cities has dramatically increased. As just one example, Frisco, Texas, in the Dallas-Ft. Worth Metroplex, recently grew from a population of under 40,000 to over 80,000 in just five years.

At the same time that communities across America are experiencing rapid changes, the data demands of new planning technologies have also increased. These dual trends place new pressures on census and other federal data to provide more detailed, localized information on a more frequent basis without compromising the overall integrity of the data. No small challenge.

The Census Bureau has launched a series of new products and new product delivery strategies to address the problem. Obviously, the challenges confronting contemporary urban America are too great and too complex to rely on data that are updated every ten years. Recognizing this fact, the Census Bureau designed and launched the American Community Survey. ACS is intended to replace the decennial long form information with annual updates. ACS will eventually provide annual data at the census tract level.

The advent of ACS data will provide planners with a wealth of reliable data that will lead to better plans, better public participation, and the promise of better decision-making by local elected officials. Planning enhances investor confidence and these investments – of money, time and talent – keep America's cities strong. APA supports ACS, and I urge Congress to continue providing the resources necessary to ensure its full implementation. Resources provided to ACS constitute an investment in improved municipal policy that can reduce wasteful spending while targeting genuine needs.

Other new Census Bureau products are also helping planners address important urban problems. Planners using the economic census, Local Employment Dynamics (LED) and Longitudinal Employer Household Dynamics (LEHD) programs are linking shifts in industrial sectors and workforce requirements not only to economic development strategies but also to the provision of critical infrastructure and related social services.

Quarterly Workforce Indicators, derived from the LED/LEHD programs, are a new but vital tool in helping cities and their surrounding regions understand and begin to address the frequent mismatch in the location of jobs versus the availability of workforce housing. This imbalance is a major culprit in two of the most pressing problems confronting cities: transportation congestion and lack of affordable housing.

Los Angeles County is using new data and GIS technology to support its Workforce Collaborative program. The initiative connects employees, training facilities, and businesses. Unemployed and low-income workers are linked to opportunities for higher paying jobs requiring limited training. GIS shows people the training and employment opportunities nearby their homes. The county uses the mapping provided by the system to identify and target transportation, employment training, and other human services.

The combination of better data and better data access that helps planners understand demographic shifts, economic trends, and workforce needs can, and should, drive improved use of state and federal resources for local infrastructure investment.

Bangor, Maine, provides an interesting example in the city's use of GIS to guide public policy and ensure residential and retail compatibility along a high growth corridor. The city used a variety of data sources to map undeveloped land, flood zones, wetlands, critical habitat, and existing retail along a central corridor. Potential buildings were also mapped along with the existing transportation network. The city is now using the system to guide both transportation planning and a variety of land use decisions. Data mapping of the area was key to identifying the problem and helping policymakers make key decisions.

The jobs-housing imbalance is but one issue confronting cities in the context of their larger region. Regional policymaking is often fraught with parochialism and politics. Yet, a growing number of urban problems demand a regional approach. Issues such as air and water quality, transportation, and even affordable housing are difficult to solve within the boundaries of a single jurisdiction, whether city, first-ring suburb or exurb. A data-rich planning process can be a vital part of improving regional cooperation and the success of regional initiatives. A planning process that demonstrates important trends in objective terms can help policymakers reach consensus on important regional issues.

Census data can also play an important role in the emerging urban planning arena of security and hazard mitigation planning. Threats to public safety from crime, terrorism and natural disaster are becoming a focus for planning. APA encourages communities to develop a security and hazard mitigation component as part of their overall comprehensive plan. As part of that process, planners are working with other governmental agencies to do critical infrastructure assessment and mapping, hazard zone mapping, and extensive code reform. Federal demographic and population movement data help planners identify high-risk population centers for incorporation into the mitigation plan. Local policymakers need to use such tools when evaluating development patterns, determining project funding, and evaluating local codes and zoning.

The Census Bureau deserves praise for its ongoing commitment to improving access to federal data. The dramatic expansion and improvement of online census resources has brought more data to more planners. By digitizing increasing amounts of data, the Census Bureau has made the task of translating raw census data in usable formats for planning, such as GIS, much easier. Data are used more efficiently and more frequently, thus increasing the return on this investment by the federal government.

The increasingly widespread use of GIS and the growing sophistication of this technology have led to more and better thematic mapping and exploratory spatial analysis. This is made possible by linking census data to computer models and maps. GIS now figures prominently in local government agencies beyond the planning department. Public safety, public health, economic development and housing agencies are all now regular users of this technology.

However, we continue confront a problem of user education. I am pleased to report that APA and the Census Bureau are collaborating on training local government professionals in the use and availability of data, but much more remains to be done in this area. The Bureau's American Factfinder, for example, is a tremendous tool for those who know how to use it effectively, but too many officials are either unaware that it exists or unable to effectively use it. APA encourages the Census Bureau to continue working to raise awareness of new data products and to increase its collaboration with APA and other NGOs in providing necessary training in the application of these data products.

As GIS have become more sophisticated and applications more widespread, the data requirements are becoming more demanding and complex. Small area data are essential to the continuing evolution and efficiency of GIS systems. Such data also help cities apply objective analysis to more micro-level decisions by increasing their understanding of changes within individual neighborhoods.

These small area datasets are equally important in the use of community indicators. Community indicators are a tool increasingly used to benchmark changes in key quality of life criteria for communities and neighborhoods. Indicators are a collection of several data measures that reflect economic, environmental and social vitality. They can be extremely important to planners because they can project whether or not a community is improving, declining or remaining stable in several different categories. This information can serve as a guide in shaping local policies. Communities looking at indicators of poverty, for example, may analyze conventional criteria such as annual median income, but may also look at nontraditional indicators such as the number of check cashing stores located in a particular area. Indicators have proven equally useful as tools for engaging the public on planning-related issues.

Data-driven tools such as GIS, indicators, and scenario planning are an important component of policymaking because, as already noted, urban America is in a period of rapid change and transformation. These changes cannot be understood or responded to appropriately by local officials without analytic tools that can detect and detail key trends. Urban America looks quite

different today than even a few years ago when Census 2000 was completed. Researchers and planners agree that more change is coming.

APA recently published a report by Virginia Tech Professor Arthur C. Nelson that examined a variety of data to make projections about future growth. Casting his eye twenty-five years into the future, Professor Nelson estimated that the national population is likely to expand by one-third, to 375 million. According to Nelson, the nation must plan now on accommodating 60 million new housing units and more than 50 billion additional square feet of nonresidential space. Another 45 billion square feet of nonresidential space will need to be rebuilt, rehabilitated or redeveloped. If Nelson's estimates are approximately correct, half of all development in 2030 will have been built since 2000 and \$20 trillion will be spent on construction or redevelopment. Nelson argues that the first three decades of the twenty-first century will see more urban development than any comparable period in the nation's history.

Certainly not all, perhaps not even most, of this new capacity will be located in today's urban core. But, accommodating some of this development in our cities is vital to the health of both cities and the larger region. For example, during my time in Pittsburgh as Deputy Planning Director, we were able to show that a typical new job in downtown Pittsburgh generated only 1/9<sup>th</sup> of the vehicle miles traveled as that same job in the suburbs. Job growth in the downtown was good for the city but it was also good for the rest of the region.

Our country increasingly finds itself competing in a global economy with the rate of change escalating, people and jobs newly mobile, and human capital more readily available. Good planning assures a competitive future. Good planning anticipates and guides change.

As change accelerates, the data challenge becomes particularly important. Officials must understand development trends in order to effectively manage infrastructure and services. Good plans, based on good and regularly updated data, are an essential governing tool in such an environment. Communities that manage this process through intuition or strictly political calculations will see either a cycle of disinvestment or a dysfunctional infrastructure network that chokes efficiency, undermines citizen choice, and wastes resources.

It is important to note that the urban change we are experiencing is not a simple story of growth in population or development. Perhaps the more challenging aspect of today's city is the dramatic shifts taking place in the demographic and economic engines of urban change. Many cities with a seemingly static population are nevertheless experiencing significant change in the composition of that population. Change is distinct from growth, but a careful examination of key data provides valuable insights into how these changes affect policy decisions.

Today's urban demographics are being driven by strong forces of immigration and population shifts. Most major cities in the United States are growing at a modest pace but experiencing enormous change in the composition of that population. At the same time, the most pronounced population growth in sheer numbers is occurring in out-lying suburban areas, the third-ring suburbs or the "exurbs."

When we look at the change in the nature of our urban population, we see some interesting new developments. First, a growing number of empty nest baby boomers are returning to the city. Second, cities are attracting young singles and couples without children in greater numbers. Third, immigration trends are leading to rapid transformation of selected neighborhoods. But, in the midst of these changes, pockets of persistent poverty remain.

School facility planning provides a useful example of how these trends affect policymaking and the need for accurate, timely data. Many big cities are discovering that amidst increases in overall population there is a continuing erosion of the number of children enrolled in public schools. A planning consultant working with a major Southeastern city school board used census data to provide infrastructure need forecasts. While the city was growing, the number of school age children was declining. Not altogether surprising given that the household type data suggested growth in empty nest couples and seniors. The report suggested that the overall number of schools needed to be pared down in response to declining enrollment yet at the same time some specific inner-city neighborhoods experiencing rapid immigration growth required additional resources. The infrastructure plan would allow scarce resources to be targeted to

cover growth in some areas while maximizing rehabilitation in other areas by eliminating excess capacity.

Another example comes from my time as planning director in Minneapolis. While Minneapolis was not growing as rapidly as it had in the late 1950s, its public schools were faced with an increase of approximately 1,000 students each September, leading to the construction of five new schools in only five years. The cause of the increase was discovered by examining immigration patterns. Minneapolis had become a major center for Somali immigrants. The Somali population in one Minneapolis junior high school increased from a few hundred to more than a thousand in three years.

Schools are not the only area where change is nuanced and the required policy response complex. We see similar issues arising in areas as diverse as transportation, parks, public works, and public health. New populations are using the city's infrastructure and service network in different ways than their predecessors. An examination of pedestrian safety in Northern Virginia discovered a disproportionate fatality rate among Hispanic immigrants. Further analysis suggested that high immigrant neighborhoods were experiencing sharp increases in travel by foot and use of bus service. The reasons likely center on a combination of culture and income, but the policy response was straightforward: target investment in pedestrian amenities and examine access to public transportation.

What census data are telling us is that urban America is changing in ways that are both encouraging and worrisome. What is encouraging is that the long decline of central cities, beginning after World War II, has begun to reverse. During the 1990's, 28 of the 40 central cities of the 35 most populous metropolitan areas were stable or experiencing population increases, and most of these increases occurred in neighborhoods with significant amounts of pre-1940 housing. In contrast, troubling signs are appearing in nearby suburbs. By 2000, 155 suburbs in the same 35 largest metropolitan areas were below 60 percent of metropolitan per capita income, a change from 121 suburbs in 1990. Analysis of census data suggests that the size and quality of housing plays a role in this pattern, as well as people's preferences for more urban living.

Among planners, there is a growing recognition that public investment not based on reliable data and analysis may constitute a hidden tax in the form of higher costs for infrastructure. The Urban Land Institute calculated that on average a new home ten miles from downtown costs taxpayers twice as much as one nearer to downtown. Decisions about the location and maintenance of public facilities can have a major impact on the direction of growth. A lack of coordination on infrastructure and growth decisions or a lack of consistency with the local plan not only encourages sprawl but also increases the costs borne by taxpayers.

I know the Chairman has a special interest in the promotion of brownfield redevelopment. These important parcels of urban land can act either as a neighborhood asset if developed, or a liability if allowed to remain contaminated. Cities can use data technology to systematically identify these properties as part of redevelopment plans. For example, this effort is underway in a four-county region of Northeast Ohio where brownfields are mapped and redevelopment planning efforts coordinated based on the collected data.

I was personally involved in reclaiming brownfields in both Pittsburgh and Minneapolis and it is quite gratifying to see those previously unproductive sites now being used by workers and residents.

Likewise, much work is being done in helping cities map vacant and abandoned properties. Census data are an important part of these efforts and can be critical components of encouraging urban reinvestment that bolsters the local economy, maximizes existing federal, state and local investment in urban infrastructure, and reduces development pressures on undeveloped exurban or rural land.

The pace of change and the scope of change place new demands on our built environment. Data-driven planning can aid elected officials in making good decisions about resources and investment. Likewise, adopting comprehensive plans that are based on a thorough understanding of change in a city's neighborhoods and its economy can provide a blueprint for private development and public investment that limits waste and maximizes the efficiency of a city's

infrastructure and social service network. Furthermore, consistency with an adopted and regularly updated plan provides private sector developers with a level of certainty that actually promotes investment. Developers must manage risk. Planning enhances investor confidence.

Planning is, at its core, about managing change in a way that engages citizens, reflects their vision, and results in increased value. Given the significant changes happening in our cities and the changes portended by many studies and indicators, planning is more vital than ever as a tool for informed municipal decision-making.

Two recent award-winning projects – Envision Utah and Chicago Metropolis 2020 – have used technical modeling, based on local data, to help stakeholders plan for where and how they live. These initiatives are leading examples of how communities can prosper when local citizens and interest groups have a collective opportunity to access data about their neighborhood, region or state and decide together how best to adapt to changes such as population growth and ever-changing demographic characteristics.

As part of Envision Utah, Quality Growth Demonstration Projects have taken place in three sub-regions where 21 cities in the Wasatch region are working together to plan for their regions. After collecting baseline inventory using some of the state's technical tools and analysis of public input, Envision Utah developed alternative growth scenarios showing possible development patterns that could result if various growth strategies are implemented during the next 20 to 50 years. An extensive analysis of each scenario was conducted to determine and demonstrate the relative costs and impacts of each strategy on population, infrastructure costs, air quality, water, open space and recreation, preservation, traffic congestion, affordable housing, business patterns and other significant topics. Extensive public input was gathered leading to the adoption of a new regional growth plan.

Similarly, Chicago Metropolis 2020 provided local citizens with graphic representations of growth scenarios for the area based on forecast data and trends. The graphics allowed stakeholders to visualize what can occur by making certain choices, including a “business-as-

usual” approach. Forecast data was indispensable to the modeling scenarios that were used to plan within a community, region or state.

Interestingly, both initiatives were spearheaded by the private sector and provided a platform for public analysis of complex, yet simply presented, planning data. These initiatives are now helping to shape an array of development and infrastructure policies in their respective areas.

While census data are invaluable and irreplaceable resources for local decision making, significant data challenges continue to confront planners. There remain important urban policy and program areas for which census data are not always available, complete or applicable. Further, many data sources do not provide sufficient small area detail to fully capture important changes and trends in urban neighborhoods.

Public safety, public works, and planning and development review are the three largest activities of a typical local government. While Census Bureau data and programs are useful and critical to all three, local governments have to fill information gaps from other data sources. This mixing of data can be a challenge, as in the different ways race data are collected and tabulated by school districts as compared to the Census Bureau. This is also true for local economic analysis, as the Census Bureau’s economic programs do not directly cover all pertinent aspects of, for example, evaluating an annexation or development proposal.

With ACS and other new census datasets, it is clear that the Bureau is working to improve the applicability of federal data to local uses. Planners recognize that it will always be necessary to supplement federal data sources with other sources, but increased cooperation among federal data officials, planners, and local officials can help ensure that the federal investment in data provides maximum benefit for local decision making.

APA remains concerned about improving census data collection mechanisms and avoiding undercounts and “under projections” for urban areas. Urban centers present special challenges when it comes to accurately measuring population. We recognize and applaud the efforts of the Census Bureau to improve its process for Census 2000. However, the issue remains an important concern, particularly given the large number of federal programs with aid linked to

census population counts. The Census Bureau has fully modernized its data dissemination methods and products, but more work remains to be done in data collection and acquisition.

APA urges Congress to continue its support of new census data products, particularly the American Community Survey. Full funding for the implementation of ACS and the development of smaller scale ACS data is vital to planning that leads to good local policy decisions.

APA also recommends that Congress support continued innovation in federal data development and delivery. New tools such as LED/LEHD are having a direct impact on local and regional problem solving. More such federal investment would pay dividends in wiser local use of federal program funding. APA encourages Congress to support similar innovation in other federal data agencies. Advances in remotely sensed data and new geologic information can vastly improve our understanding of regional land use and growth patterns, as well as support hazard mitigation programs.

Lastly, I would suggest that Congress provide new support for expanding community planning capacity. While GIS systems and scenario planning are becoming more commonplace, there are vast disparities in access to this technology and training in its full implementation. Promoting better planning and improving local planning capacity through technical assistance and other incentives does not mean intruding on the traditional deference given to localities in planning. Rather it would make other federal programs more effective and improve local policy making.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the subcommittee today to discuss these issues of great importance to the nation's cities and urban communities. APA appreciates your leadership in focusing attention on how planning, supported by good data resources, can support and enhance public decision-making and investments.